

## **“The Impact of the Ukraine War on Russia’s Role in the Middle East”**

Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa,  
and Global Counterterrorism

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As prepared

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, Members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism: Thank you for inviting me to participate in today’s hearing. My name is Hanna Notte, and I am a Senior Research Associate at the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, where I conduct research on security and arms control issues involving Russia, the Middle East, and their intersection. I am here to speak solely in a personal capacity and my views do not reflect the institutional views of my center.

### **Russia’s perspective on the MENA region in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine**

Your decision to hold a hearing on the impact of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region could not be timelier. As Russia settles into what will likely be a protracted war of aggression against Ukraine, the ripple effects are progressively being felt across the Middle East—high energy prices, soaring food prices, and increasing concerns over future wheat supplies. There are also fears that the region might turn into an additional arena for Russia’s heightened competition with the West.

How does Moscow look at the MENA region in this new era? It has been my assessment, which was reaffirmed in conversations with Russian officials and experts in Moscow just days before Russia’s February 24 invasion of Ukraine, that Russia’s approach to the region has settled into a stable *modus operandi* in recent years. Russia is pursuing important security and economic interests in the region. First, Moscow considers its military presence and diplomatic leverage in Syria essential to create a buffer zone on its southern flank, to counter perceived security threats from both *within* the region and *beyond*—i.e., militarily push back against the United States and NATO outside Europe, if it so chooses. That presence has also enabled Moscow to project power beyond Syria into the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. Second, Russia has turned to the MENA region in a broader effort to diversify its economic relations in the wake of the 2014 annexation of Crimea, albeit with limited success beyond specific areas that include arms sales, civilian nuclear exports, wheat supplies, and tourism. In pursuing these interests, Russia has been implementing a “low cost, high disruption”<sup>1</sup> approach which, aside from the limited military presence in Syria, has entailed highly active diplomacy and hybrid tactics such as the use of private military companies and disinformation. Russia pragmatically leverages the self-interests of regional actors to achieve its goals, with little concern for human rights or the rule of law.

**This approach to the MENA region will not fundamentally change following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.** Since February 24, Russia’s diplomacy vis-à-vis regional players has

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<sup>1</sup> Chen Kane and Miles Pomper, “Implications of Russia’s Activities in the Middle East and North Africa for U.S. Strategy and Interests,” CNS Occasional Paper, No. 54, December 2021, [https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/op541221\\_implications\\_russia.pdf](https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/op541221_implications_russia.pdf).

remained highly active, aimed at securing existing interests. A key part of this effort has been to offset the consequences of long-term Western sanctions on the Russian economy while also demonstrating that the country is not isolated internationally. To that end, Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Algeria and Oman last week, having hosted the foreign ministers of Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Qatar, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Moscow in March and April.

Going forward, Russia's efforts at scoping opportunities across the region might be accompanied, however, by military risk aversion. The Russian military will likely seek to avoid acts of brinkmanship vis-à-vis U.S. forces in Syria while the bulk of its active-duty military remains fully committed inside Ukraine. It is unlikely to challenge the existing U.S.-Russian deconfliction mechanisms in Syria. Instead, because of the protracted military manpower issues caused by the war in Ukraine, Russia might well rely even more intensively on hybrid means to maintain influence and build leverage in the MENA region. Those could include disinformation campaigns, covert action to stir animosity among polarized communities, or attempts at electoral meddling.

### **Russian cooperation with the United States in MENA after the invasion of Ukraine**

Amid the anticipated efforts to avoid military risks and preserve gains, Russia's willingness to cooperate with (rather than confront) the United States will likely vary from case to case. In past years, specific Middle East dossiers—arms control and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and, to a lesser extent, humanitarian aid and U.N.-led political processes—remained somewhat insulated from the broader downturn in Russian-Western relations. **Going forward, Russia's overall willingness to compartmentalize these issues might be diminished.**

Starting with nuclear arms control and non-proliferation, Russia's principled objective to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon remains unchanged.<sup>2</sup> Though Moscow appeared willing to spoil the negotiations to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in early March—demanding written U.S. guarantees that Russia's trade, investment, and military-technical cooperation with Tehran would not be hindered by the sanctions imposed against it over Ukraine—it subsequently appeared to drop those demands. Over recent weeks, Russian diplomats have commented less frequently on the talks, as attention has shifted to the question of removing Iran's Quds Force, an arm of its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), from a U.S. list of foreign terrorist organizations. However, a Russian diplomat recently hinted that the current geopolitical tensions might reduce Moscow's willingness to exert significant political capital to mediate a finalization of the nuclear deal.<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not the parties decide to restore the JCPOA, going forward, Russia is unlikely to support U.S. efforts to curb other threats, such as Iran's use of missiles and proxies. For years, Russia has insisted on the separation of these issues from the nuclear dossier while

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<sup>2</sup> Russia fears that Iran's weaponization of its nuclear program could precipitate wider escalation and conflict in the Middle East, which could also affect Russia and its neighborhood. In addition, Russia views the possession of nuclear weapons as a distinct privilege that should be reserved to existing nuclear-weapons states, as defined by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

<sup>3</sup> Tweet by Russian Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov on 13 May 2022: "Under different circumstances Russia, probably, could have provided its good offices to the two sides to finalise agreement on #JCPOA. But not now." [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1525095444178784257](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1525095444178784257).

hoping to benefit from Iran's regional policies. As long as Iran's missile and proxy threats do not precipitate full-blown regional war or threaten Russian interests *directly*, the instability they generate pins down U.S. resources while elevating Russia as a regional mediator. Following the invasion of Ukraine, that Russian calculus regarding Iran's regional activities is unlikely to change. Indeed, Russia might be more willing to sell advanced weapons to Iran, should other regional buyers shun Russian systems due to a heightened threat of U.S. sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), or due to a concern that Western sanctions will decimate Russia's ability to service and maintain systems over the medium and long term. Finally, the implications of Russia's irresponsible nuclear saber-rattling over Ukraine for proliferation trends in the region require careful monitoring. Countries in the region took note of the precedent of a nuclear-weapon state attempting to use veiled nuclear threats for the purpose of deterring other states from conventionally defending a non-nuclear-weapon state, potentially leading them to consider options beyond U.S. conventional declaratory security guarantees.

Turning to the humanitarian situation in Syria, U.N. Security Council Resolution 2585, which details the mandate for the transport of aid through the Bab al-Hawa crossing on the border with Turkey, is up for renewal in July. Russia's veto is widely feared, though such obstruction would not serve Moscow's interests. Rationally speaking, the Kremlin should wish to avert the worsening of Syria's food crisis by shutting down cross-border aid, especially if an endgame in Ukraine remains elusive. Moreover, Russia pocketed gains from supporting Resolution 2585 last summer, including extensive diplomatic attention from Western capitals, an expansion in early recovery assistance to its ally Syria, and Turkey's gratitude. That said, Russia's calculations regarding the upcoming U.N. Security Council vote will likely extend beyond Syria to include the broader geopolitical situation. Having been refused a seat at the recent Syria donor conference in Brussels, and amid heightened animosity between Russia and Western states in the U.N. system generally, Moscow might well choose to block the renewal, casting rational cost-benefit calculations aside. It would therefore be prudent for the U.S. government to anticipate a Russian veto and intensify efforts to support Syrians (and Turkey) through mechanisms that are not hostage to Russia's periodic consent. The U.S. Treasury Department's recent decision to authorize activities in certain economic sectors in non-regime-held areas of Syria is a step in that direction.

Amid heightened Russian-Western tensions in Europe, it is also unlikely that Russia will exert pressure on the Syrian government to substantively engage in the Constitutional Committee, whose "small body" convened for its seventh session in Geneva in late March. We should be under no illusion: Moscow has viewed, and will continue to view, the committee largely as a vehicle for stalling on any meaningful political change in Syria. Russia is eager to keep the committee on "life support," hoping to be able to point to Syria's participation in a U.N.-led process when calling for normalization with the Assad government, but feels no compulsion to see its work advance in a timely fashion. Rather, Moscow will prioritize its ongoing efforts at advancing normalization between Gulf Arab states and the Assad government, hoping that the former can share the burden of sustaining Syria economically. In that regard, President Assad's recent visit to Abu Dhabi was registered favorably in Moscow. Indeed, it is conceivable that Russia will now prioritize the emergence of an Arab counterweight to Iran in Syria with greater urgency, to prepare for the contingency that Russia may need to scale back its own presence in Syria due to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Russia's leverage over the trajectory of other regional conflicts and developments—including the war in Yemen, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and

normalization between Israel and Arab states building on the “Abraham Accords”—has been limited. This will likely remain the case, as the war in Ukraine and its fallout in Europe will consume significant Russian military and diplomatic bandwidth for a protracted period.

In my assessment, prior to its 2015 intervention in Syria, Moscow periodically entertained the possibility that cooperation on select issues in the Middle East could be leveraged to seek Washington’s goodwill on other bilateral issues. In recent years, the Russian leadership has become increasingly dismissive of that possibility. Coupled with a belief in Moscow that Russia’s own approach to the Middle East is successful and sustainable, this dismissive attitude probably will intensify in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine war and might further militate against cooperation with the United States.

### **Opportunities to undermine “fence-sitting” by U.S. regional allies and partners?**

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, most regional U.S. allies and partners have been reluctant to unequivocally condemn Moscow or assist in generating pressure on the Russian economy. Saudi Arabia has rebuffed U.S. requests to pump more oil to help tame surging crude prices, insisting on adherence to its agreement with OPEC+ partners on production levels. The UAE abstained from a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning the Russian invasion in late February. Saudi and Emirati leaders have reportedly declined phone calls with U.S. President Biden, and all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries abstained from voting for suspension of Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council in early April.

Israel’s navigation of the Ukraine war has been more nuanced, with officials offering harsher criticism of Russian killings in Ukraine’s Bucha or signaling that Israel will not enable Russia’s evasion of sanctions. Following a recent row in Russian-Israeli relations, caused by Foreign Minister Lavrov’s anti-Semitic remarks, Israel is reportedly weighing increased provision of nonlethal military equipment to Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> Still, Israel will likely continue to tread cautiously, shying away from supporting sanctions against Russia, given the perceived role the latter plays in limiting the presence of Iran-backed proxies in southern Syria and the need to deconflict with Russia’s military.

The inclination of U.S. regional allies and partners to “sit out” the Ukraine war, to the extent possible, is rooted in a number of considerations, most of which predate February 24:

There is a perception across MENA states that the Ukraine war is not “their” war. Regional interlocutors tend to view the conflict through a great-power prism, characterizing it as a U.S./NATO-Russia war, fueled at least in part by NATO actions vis-a-vis Russia, rather than as a Russian war of aggression against a sovereign country, Ukraine. As a result, unlike in Western societies, the conflict does not register across the Middle East as a test for a “rules-based international order.”

This perspective is amplified by accusations of Western double standards in responding to the Ukraine war. The significant and immediate diplomatic efforts over Ukraine, military support to Kyiv, and reception of Ukrainian refugees in Western states are—rightly or wrongly—viewed as indicative of a Western inclination to care significantly more about conflicts in Europe’s direct neighborhood than about those in the Middle East.

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<sup>4</sup> Barak Ravid, “Israel weighs expanding military aid to Ukraine after U.S. request,” *Axios*, 4 May 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/05/04/israel-weighs-increasing-military-aid-ukraine-russia>.

Such Ukraine-specific perceptions are compounded by worries among regional elites over the durability of U.S. conventional security guarantees. The Ukraine invasion—heightening what the United States calls an “acute threat” from Russia in Europe, while it faces a “long-term pacing challenge” in China—has exacerbated concerns among U.S. allies and partners about an accelerated U.S. withdrawal from the region. In addition, there is a resignation to the likelihood that the United States will use whatever bandwidth it has for the Middle East to prioritize the Iranian nuclear threat, and will pay insufficient attention to Iran’s missile and proxy activities—which many Arab states perceive as a bigger challenge to their security. Regional states calculate that Russia and China might well fill the emerging vacuum in an increasingly volatile region in which the United States is a receding power. In addition, each regional state has its own highly specific economic and security interests with Russia that preclude the adoption of a firmer anti-Russian position over the Ukraine war.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, even though the Russian military failed to meet its original objectives in invading Ukraine, few regional states are prepared to draw firm conclusions on the outcome of the war, and the implications for Russia, at this time. Anecdotal evidence suggests that regional governments are presently preoccupied with addressing imminent challenges related to inflation, food security, and high energy prices and are not prepared to take strategic decisions on their future relationships with Russia.

**As a result, U.S. opportunities to get regional allies and partners to turn against Russia are highly circumscribed.** A combination of continued poor Russian military performance in Ukraine with clearer signs of the impact of Western sanctions on Russia’s military-industrial complex and economic enterprise certainly could erode the economic attractiveness of Russian weapons and other technologies over the medium term. Should Russian influence in the MENA region decline due to the consequences of the Ukraine war, the United States will need to step in and offer attractive alternatives to prevent other adversaries from exploiting the ensuing vacuum—whether that concerns the prospect of China providing strategic technologies across the region or Iran expanding its influence in Syria.

More fundamentally, loosening the ties that pivotal U.S. allies and partners have been cultivating with Russia will likely require a U.S. regional strategy that is *comprehensive*—in addressing those threat perceptions that have led countries to seek diversified great-power relations—but also *specific* in mitigating actors’ distinct interests in doing business with Russia. Since European states are directly affected by conflict, instability, and migration in their direct MENA neighborhood while also seeking to reduce their hydrocarbon dependencies on Russia by turning to the region, the United States should seek a greater European role in, and responsibility for, such a regional strategy.

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<sup>5</sup> Kane and Pomper, “Implications of Russia’s Activities in the Middle East and North Africa for U.S. Strategy and Interests.”